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Candace Séguinot

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Pragmatics and the Explicitation Hypothesis

Candace Séguinot

Introduction

This paper presents the results of an empirical study of explicitation in translation and reveals the contribution that this type of research is likely to make. This discussion comes with reference to Newmark (1988, pp. 21-22), describing the goal of translation studies as the solution of translation problems. Empirical studies can provide evidence about how people translate, can help us understand how languages are stored and accessed in the brain, and provide clues as to how meaning is received and encoded in language and transferred between languages.

Empirical studies in translation, however, are sometimes coloured by normative interpretation. This is particularly true of the explicitation hypothesis. The phrase was introduced by Shoshana Blum-Kulka (1986, p. 19) as follows:

The process of interpretation performed by the translator on the source text might lead to a TL text which is more redundant than the SL text. This redundancy can be expressed by a rise in the level of cohesive explicitness in the TL text. This argument may be stated as «the explicitation hypothesis», which postulates an observed cohesive explicitness from SL to TL texts regardless of the increase traceable to differences between the two linguistic and textual systems involved. It follows that explicitation is viewed here as inherent in the process of translation.

While I believe that her central thesis is correct, namely that the process of translation naturally includes a process of explicitation, there are several problems with her argument. For one thing, her definition is too narrow -- explicitness does not necessarily mean redundancy. Secondly, most of her evidence, the greater number of

words in French translations, for example, can be explained by well-documented differences in the stylistics of English and French. As Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet (1977, p. 114) have pointed out, there are two kinds of reasons why one language group might prefer to use shorter constructions: differences in structure which allow one language to say things more briefly, and psychological reasons for one language group to prefer to express themselves in particular ways (referring to French they speak of «notre souci de clarté et notre besoin de juger»). They give the following explanation for the fact that translations tend to be longer:

Il semble bien qu'en général l'anglais soit plus bref que le français. C'est du moins ce qui semble ressortir de la juxtaposition d'un texte anglais et de sa traduction en français. Mais il faut tenir compte du fait que la traduction a tendance à être plus longue que l'original. Le traducteur allonge par prudence et aussi par ignorance. (1977, pp. 184-185)

Juhel (1982, p. 67) cites several sources saying translations are longer regardless of the language.

Blum-Kulka (1986, p. 20) offers a different explanation for explicitation, but it is also a negative one:

...we can expect to find a trend for explicitation especially marked in the work of «nonprofessional» translators... The less experienced the translator, the more his or her process of interpretation of the SL might be reflected in the TL.

In fact she suggests (p. 21) that:

explicitation is a universal strategy inherent in the process of language mediation, as practised by language learners, non-professional translators and professional translators alike.

Mixing as they do the normative with the observational, the above statements illustrate some general problems with the interpretation of comparative or empirical studies. Both imply that explicitation may be common, but that it is undesirable, that there might have been a way of producing a better translation or that a more competent translator might have produced an equivalent text. The explanation offered by Blum-Kulka seems, in addition, to confuse coping or fudging strategies that are used to circumvent language problems and the editing strategies which appear to be part of the process of comprehending a source text and attending to audience and institutional needs.

'Explicitation' used in the latter sense can only be defined relative to the kind and degree of 'explicitness' in a given language. Languages are inherently explicit or implicit in the kinds of information they convey and the way they convey it, first through their formal properties and secondly through their stylistic and rhetorical preferences. French makes grammatical gender explicit, which leads to more explicit anaphoric reference. French has no choice but to express logical links with prepositions or relatives where English creates noun strings. English, on the other hand, prefers overt linking words to French absolute constructions. English verbs are generally more precise and descriptive, and in directions and procedural writing, English is more explicit than French. Compare, for example, the English 'Yield' to the French 'Vous n'avez pas la priorité'. Or the following traffic sign seen on a recent trip to France: 'Prudence! Nos enfants traversent seuls', which would have to become 'Drive carefully' in English. Generalizations are dangerous, however, as the degree of explicitness in a language is clearly linked to text types; procedures may be explicit in English, but bureaucratic writing is implicit.

The term 'explicitation' should therefore be reserved in translation studies for additions in a translated text which cannot be explained by structural, stylistic, or rhetorical differences between the two languages. In other words, to prove that there was explicitation, there must have been the possibility of a correct but less explicit or less precise version. This is the only way to distinguish between choices that can be accounted for in the language system, and choices that come about because of the nature of the translation process.

Explicitation can take three forms in a translation: something is expressed in the translation which was not in the original, something which was implied or understood through presupposition in the source text is overtly expressed in the translation, or an element in the source text is given greater importance in the translation through focus, emphasis, or lexical choice.

The Present Study

In two previous studies, I looked at translation from French into English in two different fields: journalism and administration. In both cases I found evidence of what I called an editing process. The present study was designed to test these findings in translations from English to French. A second purpose was to look at whether the institutional attitude to translation influenced the degree of explicitation. A revisor with the Life Underwriter's Association of Canada and the owner of a translation agency volunteered their help and provided the translations. The insurance corpus was over 17,000 words, and was produced by one person; the company report, approx-

imately 3,000 words, was done by two translators. I worked with the draft copy and also had the revisor's later comments and changes.

In the case of the first corpus, the revisor explained that both he and the translator tried to achieve a French text close to the length of the English text because the English texts they are given to translate are often badly written and because the French language is conceptually more concise. In the case of the second corpus, the owner of the agency explained that in their area of specialization, accounting and annual reports, the French has to follow the English relatively closely. One of the goals of the study was to see whether these different perceptions of the principles guiding day-to-day translation were reflected in differences in the translations themselves.

Results

This study confirms the findings of previous research carried out on French-to-English translations which indicated that there is greater explicitness in the translated text. This explicitness derives from improved topic-comment links and improved focus (e.g. the last two sentences of the first paragraph in the excerpt labelled Corpus 1 in the Appendix), the addition of linking words (e.g. 'Sur ces deux points' and 'mais' in Corpus 1), and a raising of information subordinated in the source text into co-ordinate or principal structures, particularly in Corpus 2. Where the translation is less explicit (e.g. sentence 1, paragraph 2, Corpus 1), the writing is improved.

While there is an overwhelming tendency to explicitation of these text-related types, i.e. through improved cohesion and coherence, there was no evidence of a tendency to explicitation on the level of lexical choice; these English-to-French translations generally used less precise vocabulary than the source text, the opposite of what was found in the studies of French-to-English translations. This was partly due to the dropping of jargon (e.g. 'ground up' in Corpus 2) and partly to the use of more general vocabulary.

Turning to the pragmatics of the translating situation, there do not appear to be differences in the degree of explicitation in the two corpora. The only difference between the corpora seems to be related to the translators' conception of their task is that the first corpus sometimes combines or re-orders as many as three sentences in the same paragraph while the second corpus restricts these permutations to combinations of two sentences. The stylistic devices particular to the translator of the first corpus are interesting given the translator's view that French is more concise. The use of the semi-colon which shortens the text is more typical of English than French, as is the use of the dash and the highlighting of technical terms (e.g. paragraph 1) which enhance the readability of the text.

Interpretation

There seems to be a hidden assumption in translation studies that pragmatics, meaning the physical and institutional constraints on the actual production of a translation, affect performance but do not reflect competence. Stated differently, the attitude seems to be that to understand the translation process we need to study perfect texts (preferably interesting texts, i.e. literature) translated perfectly by competent professionals. I would like to argue the reverse. Literary translation, and in fact any translation that is not produced under institutional and time constraints, probably involves a creative process much like the difference between creative and business and technical writing. The latter are very much concerned with conventions, with models, with problem-solving, and with targeting an audience. In other words, there may well be more than one translation process, and it is unlikely that observation will capture the essence of the creative process. However, studies of institutional translation may provide us with information about translation strategies, help us understand sources of error, and provide clues as to the mental processes underlying the production of translations. It seems likely, for example, that explicitation of information and logical and textual links is a natural byproduct of institutional translation, whereas lexical explicitation depends on the stylistic preferences of the target language and the institution. In terms of the methodology of research, it is not clear that translators' own perceptions of the process will be of much help.

Empirical research is also a way of testing out translation models. For example, Werner and Schoepfle (1987, p. 358) have distinguished between compound and co-ordinate bilinguals, suggesting that only the latter can translate with ease because they have established links of referential identity between languages. However, this does not explain how stylistic preferences are accessed: French has a passive, but makes use of it less often than English; English can front adverbial clauses, but prefers weightier predicates. The present study shows that lexical access is also affected by overall stylistic preferences.

Glendon College, York University

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Appendix

Corpus 1

Insurance newsletter

It is proposed that stage 2 will also bring further adjustments to the income tax system including further income tax reductions for middle-income Canadians and payment of substantially enriched refundable sales tax credits in advance to more households. Both stages are intended to be revenue neutral within themselves. The Government does not need stage 2 to pay for stage 1.

This bulletin replaces the commentary regarding the stage 1 proposals in LUAC's July 6, 1987 "Tax Reform 1987" bulletin. No further official information has been released about stage 2 since June, except for the announcement that Mr. Wilson does not intend stage 2 to tax food items, prescription drugs and certain medical devices or to increase taxes for certain government-financial institutions. Consequently, the commentary in the July 6, 1987 bulletin concerning stage 2 remains relevant.

The implementation of the new system for tax-assisted retirement saving will proceed as part of stage 1 but will become effective in 1989, instead of 1988, as previously announced. The increase in the dollar limits on deductible contributions will be phased in more slowly than was previously announced.

Corpus 2

Annual Report

The Company currently has projects under construction having a value in excess of \$328 million which will add over 1,751,000 square feet of space to the Cambridge portfolio.

...

In addition, construction of Cambridge's two major ground up projects, Mill Woods Town Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, a regional shopping centre, and Eaton Centre Metroland, Burnaby, British Columbia, an urban mixed use complex, continued on schedule in 1987. The \$52 million, 437,000 square foot wholly owned Mill Woods Town Centre, to be anchored by a Woodward's department store, a Safeway food store and a K mart department store, and including 195,000 square feet of specialty retail tenant space, is expected to open for business in August, 1988.

Textes français

elle apportera également - selon les propositions - des rajustements supplémentaires du système de l'impôt sur le revenu, en particulier des réductions supplémentaires de l'impôt sur le revenu des contribuables à revenu moyen ainsi que le paiement anticipé - au bénéfice d'un plus grand nombre de ménages - des crédits remboursables au titre de la taxe de vente et une augmentation considérable de ces crédits. Les étapes n'auront toutes les deux, en principe, aucune répercussion sur les recettes fiscales; la deuxième ne servira pas à compenser la première.

Le présent bulletin remplace la partie de celui du 6 juillet 1987 qui est relative à la première étape. Pour ce qui est de la deuxième étape, ce bulletin du 6 juillet reste valable puisque aucune nouvelle information n'a été officiellement donnée depuis juin, sauf que M. Wilson n'a pas l'intention de taxer les produits alimentaires, les médicaments vendus sur ordonnance et divers appareils médicaux, ni d'augmenter les impôts sur certaines institutions financées par l'État.

La mise en application du nouveau système de l'aide fiscale à l'épargne-retraite se fera au cours de la première étape, mais elle n'entrera en vigueur qu'en 1989 et non pas en 1988 comme il en avait déjà été question; le relèvement des plafonds de cotisations déductibles se fera, lui aussi, plus lentement que prévu.

La valeur des biens en voie de construction s'élève à plus de 328 millions de dollars. Ces projets ajouteront plus de 1 751 000 pieds carrés d'espace au portefeuille de Cambridge.

...

En outre, les travaux de construction des deux importants projets de Cambridge, le Mill Woods Town Centre, à Edmonton, en Alberta, centre commercial régional, et le Eaton Centre Metroland, à Burnaby, en Colombie-Britannique, complexe urbain polyvalent, ont progressé selon l'échéancier prévu en 1987. On s'attend à ce que le Mill Woods Town Center, dont le coût s'élève à 52 millions de dollars et qui aura une superficie de 437 000 pieds carrés, ouvre ses portes en août 1988. Les piliers de ce centre, qui appartient en propriété exclusive à Cambridge, seront un grand magasin Woodward's, un magasin d'alimentation Safeway ainsi qu'un grand magasin K mart et comprendra 195 000 pieds carrés de boutiques spécialisées.